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Contesting Images of Political Conflict

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Front and back cover: **Jon Haddock**
General Loan Shoots a Suspect — Screenshot Series (detail)
2001, Image courtesy private collection

Inside first page: **Dinh Q. Lê**
Persistence of Memory #14
2000–01, Image courtesy PPOW Gallery, New York

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CONTENTS

Image War
Contesting Images of Political Conflict 7

Memory's Void
Creating a Dialogue with Historical Traumas 11
KATY ROGERS

Digital Détournements
Spectacle in a Networked Culture 19
BENJAMIN GODSILL

Life Remixed 27
SUSANNE Ø. SÆTHER

The Presence of Absence
Art and Media Critique 39
STAMATINA GREGORY

Works in the Exhibition 47

Acknowledgments 48


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Image War

Contesting Images of Political Conflict

The mediation of images of war and conflict has long been a much-discussed topic in art and media critique. With the extreme packaging and filtration of media images in the first Gulf War, the subject has become ever more pressing. *Image War* revisits this issue within the context of the current digitized media climate, with its increasingly simplified methods of recording, processing, and distributing information. These new ways of disseminating political information can lead to more transparency, yet this openness can also be effectively prevented by corporatized media forces. One artistic response to this situation is to appropriate mass-disseminated, often iconic media images of conflict to remix, transform, or mimic. The omnipresence of many of these images in collective memory makes them crucial ground for artistic intervention.

Image War explores several strategies that occur with some frequency in contemporary, digitally influenced artworks about conflict. One artistic approach is to separate images from the media flow and translate them into different materials such as embroidery, painting, or neon. This remediation isolates iconic images from the overcharged rhetoric that often accompanies them. Works employing this strategy address the overload of conflict imagery disseminated by mass media; Images that might otherwise dissolve into oblivion or become clichéd are given a personal touch and a renewed significance through a process of physical transposition. Like remediation, the strategy of remixing uses preexisting media material, but its primary operation is to compile and reorder elements from one or more media sources. Through remixing, these works challenge conventional formats, narratives, and tempos. A third group of artists does not directly appropriate media images in their practice but rather emulates and interprets media tropes and forms. This group challenges the constructed nature of documentary evidence and brings a visual presence to events that the media has bypassed, suggesting that violent events are best contemplated through the absence of determining imagery. Mediated images tend to detach the actualities of violence from their representations. The artists featured in *Image War* appropriate media images to powerfully intervene in this representational disconnect.

TAMIKO THIEL &
ZARA HOUSHMAND
Beyond Manzanar, 2000

The essays that follow further explicate and analyze the critical framework underlying these artistic strategies. Katy Rogers examines the appropriation of historical conflict imagery in works by Dinh Q. Lê, Jon Haddock, and Amar Kanwar to explore issues of memory and trauma. In their incorporation of iconic imagery from the Vietnam War and various historical protests, each of their works creates a space for dialogue, reinterpretation, and reeducation. Benjamin Godsill explores how work by Joy Garnett, Coco Fusco, and Claire Fontaine operates in relation to a contemporary image culture marked by digital spectacle. Their projects—a painting, a video installation, and a neon sculpture—all operate at the level of digital spectacle, recognizing the necessity to confront power in its native language, in a discursive location where that power may be the most vulnerable. Susanne Ø. Sæther considers the video works of Johan Grimonprez and RSG and the virtual reality installation of Tamiko Thiel and Zara Houshmand, exploring how artistic remixing not only proposes specific ways of organizing information but also opposes the political governing of human life in situations of war and conflict. Reorganizing archival or popular media representations of violent conflicts, these works examine, respectively, the history of airplane hijackings, American military operations in Somalia in 1993, and U.S. internment camps for Japanese-Americans during World War II. Finally, Stamatina Gregory demonstrates how the absence of graphic imagery in work by Rainer Ganahl, Willie Doherty, and An-My Lê engages contemporary debates on documentary practices. Ganahl's embroidered textiles bearing responses from Afghanis to CNN text tags, Doherty's video of obscured witnesses engaging in circuitous dialogue, and Lê's expansive landscape of a Marine training camp in the desert point to an indeterminacy of meaning around specific conflicts as well as provide a site for the collision of multiple subjectivities.

We are living in a moment when violent conflict, as represented in the media, increasingly determines our understanding of political and social life. The import of the works in *Image War* resides in their gesture beyond the simplified and universalizing constructions of corporatized mass media. Through strategies of appropriation, they establish connections between experiences of political violence and their mediated images, and attempt to reclaim, renegotiate, or "talk back" to these images, allowing alternative visions and narratives to be forged.

Memory's Void

Creating a Dialogue with Historical Traumas

KATY ROGERS

One of visual culture's most powerful tools is its translation of socially familiar imagery into entirely different, jarring contexts. This power is especially evident when historical imagery is translated from a journalistic framework to an artistic one. When artists take an image from the past and recontextualize it in the present, viewers are forced to engage their prior knowledge of an image in tandem with the object that confronts them in the moment. Past and present merge, creating a space for dialogue beyond temporality and chronology. This strategy specifically parallels the disconnects inherent in globalized, modern existence. Our lives are amalgamations of the historical and the contemporary, encompassing vast networks of images drawn from many eras and societies.

"The true picture of the past flits by," wrote Walter Benjamin in 1940. "The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again . . . every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably."[1] Artists Dinh Q. Lê, Amar Kanwar, and Jon Haddock attempt such a retrieval by uncovering relationships between representations of violent conflicts in the past and the political climate and media environment of the current moment. Their works in *Image War* address the need to understand and engage with the past in new and different ways.

By drawing on now-iconic journalistic photographs of traumas that occurred around the world in the last five decades, these artists bring them home, traversing both temporal and physical boundaries. These photographs were and are consumed and accepted by many Americans as truthful accounts of conflicts in distant places.[2] They have become icons of, and the means through which, we understand historical violence at home and abroad. In their ubiquity, they foster habitual reactions, shared by a wide range of social subjects. Yet we cannot truly apprehend these images in their original format as "unaltered" journalistic footage, for the conflicts they document have left traumatic wounds on the collective psyche of contemporary society.

Trauma, for Freud, involves partial mimesis, "a situation of unconscious imitation or identification with the traumatic scene."[3] Yet "the victim can never be made to remember the traumatic experience, as the cathartic cure would have him do, but can only

AMAR KANWAR
Ma Win Maw Oo, 2005

JON HADDOCK
Wang Weilen — Screenshot Series, 2001
Image courtesy Howard House Gallery, Seattle

JON HADDOCK
General Loan Shoots a Suspect — Screenshot Series, 2001
Image courtesy Howard House Gallery, Seattle

repeat it in the immediacy of an acting out that is unrepresentable to the patient in the form of a narration of that event as *past*."[4] In the psychoanalytic sense, we can never truly grasp historical traumas; they recur for those who have lived them, but only photographic images remain for those who did not. The artists discussed in the following essay attempt to create a space within which viewers can reconnect with actual traumas (not only their distilled representations) and begin to fill the voids left by violent conflict. They do not necessarily suggest that such voids can ultimately be filled, but their works provide a framework for the negotiation of trauma.

Dinh Q. Lê explores the trauma of the Vietnam War by blending past and present and drawing on both journalistic and entertainment imagery. In the *Persistence of Memory* series (2000–01), Lê uses a black-and-white photograph taken by a journalist during the conflict and literally weaves it together with a color image from a Hollywood film on the subject (including *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989)). Lê made the works in this series by cutting two images into strips and hand-weaving them together; not only do viewers see two versions of the same conflict, they see how such versions are interrelated and feed off one another. The artist also underscores how violence and trauma are prepared for consumption as entertainment. The quiet, engaged reflection sponsored by the woven image draws the imagery out of the spectacle of entertainment and makes it personal and intimate once again. These images, although originally encountered in fairly intimate contexts (in the newspaper or on television), have become spectacularized through their incessant reproduction. The weaving, in its hand-crafted and tactile way, invokes a more reflective kind of consumption, while the pixelated quality of the historical photographs draws them into the contemporary climate of digitized media.

Lê's work concentrates on the traumatic, intertwined relationships between American and Vietnamese political and cultural history. He maintains that the two countries experienced the war differently, and tries to bring their divergent experiences closer together so as to bridge this historical gap. Lê's other projects partake of a similar

JON HADDOCK
Children Fleeing Napalm Attack —
Screenshot Series, 2001
Image courtesy Howard House Gallery, Seattle

goal: When visiting his native Vietnam from the United States, he brings soil with him to disperse in rivers in Vietnam, thus granting American MIAs a kind of reunion with their homeland.[5] In its multiple images, the *Persistence of Memory* series forces viewers to acknowledge the Vietnam War's various and different narratives, thereby prompting the realization that previous impressions of the conflict may not be as unbiased, journalistic, or accurate as was once assumed.

In the four selections from Jon Haddock's *Screenshots Series* (2001) included here, Vietnam War imagery is also at the fore. Haddock resituates recognizable photographs of graphic violence in Vietnam in the virtual realm of the computer game *The Sims*. The artist selects the conflict's most graphic and iconic imagery (children fleeing napalm bombs, Eddie Adams's photo of a Viet Cong suspect being shot point blank on the street), neutralizing (and naturalizing) them in the space of the game. Each of these photographs has come to stand for the historical moment of Vietnam; they concretize the trauma of the event for those who lived through it and those who came after. The war has been reduced over time to these images, to mere spectacle instead of deep trauma.

The look of *The Sims* compellingly highlights the historical nature of the events depicted. Both Haddock and the creators of the game employ isometric perspective, so that three-dimensional objects remain consistently to scale. This perspective resembles traditional understandings of history, in which disparate images are selected and arranged as if comprehensible in a single or linear context.

Much like Lê, Haddock toes the line of entertainment and pedagogy. *Screenshots* raises questions about how conflict and violence are

JON HADDOCK
Quang Duc — Screenshot Series, 2001
Image courtesy Howard House Gallery, Seattle

culturally naturalized through mass media outlets that target younger generations. Haddock asks how these consumers—who grew up only with iconic imagery and access to computer technology and its plethora of information—interact with the past. Such interaction affects their understanding of current politics, including, for example, the likening of the Iraq War to the Vietnam Conflict.

Amar Kanwar also gleans images from popular history but alters them even more than Haddock by transforming journalistic stills into a breathing, changing organism by means of digital alteration. The title of the work included here, *Ma Win Maw Oo* (2005), is the name of a young woman who was shot during the student uprisings in Burma in 1988. The photograph of her assassination became an icon of the struggle for democracy in Burma after its publication in *Time* magazine. Working from the photograph, Kanwar animates its figures, causing them to appear to breathe and move for approximately four minutes. By necessitating an increased amount of time for looking at and thinking about the dead woman, Kanwar forces viewers to engage with the past and question the concept that historical images are final and finite. The extended temporality creates a space for reflection and a sense of ongoing narrative where only a single moment existed before. As Susan Sontag has theorized, "A narrative seems likely to be more effective than an image. Partly it is a question of the length of time one is obliged to look, to feel."[6]

Kanwar fills a traumatic, indelible void in collective Burmese consciousness by granting life to the one who lost it. He reanimates the image for those who experienced this particular trauma firsthand and, at the same time, rescues the image and its history from its nonplace in American memory. He pushes the viewer to remember an image now forgotten, lost in the stream of violent imagery with which we are constantly barraged. By taking a single moment out of its historical context and temporally re-presenting it, he forces its memory back upon the viewer. In essence, this process resembles the psychoanalytic goal of bringing the patient to terms with a past trauma so as to incorporate it into his or her psyche, thus allowing for its productive negotiation in the future. Kanwar's work attempts to make disjointed history whole in an analogous manner.

Each of these works considers how past conflicts are incorporated into and reconciled with our current social and political climate. Raising this issue is urgent; large-scale traumas leave unrepresentable wounds, and preventing their reoccurrence depends in part on acquiring as much information about them as possible. That these traumas occurred in different spaces and times places them in the double bind of difference and inexplicability.

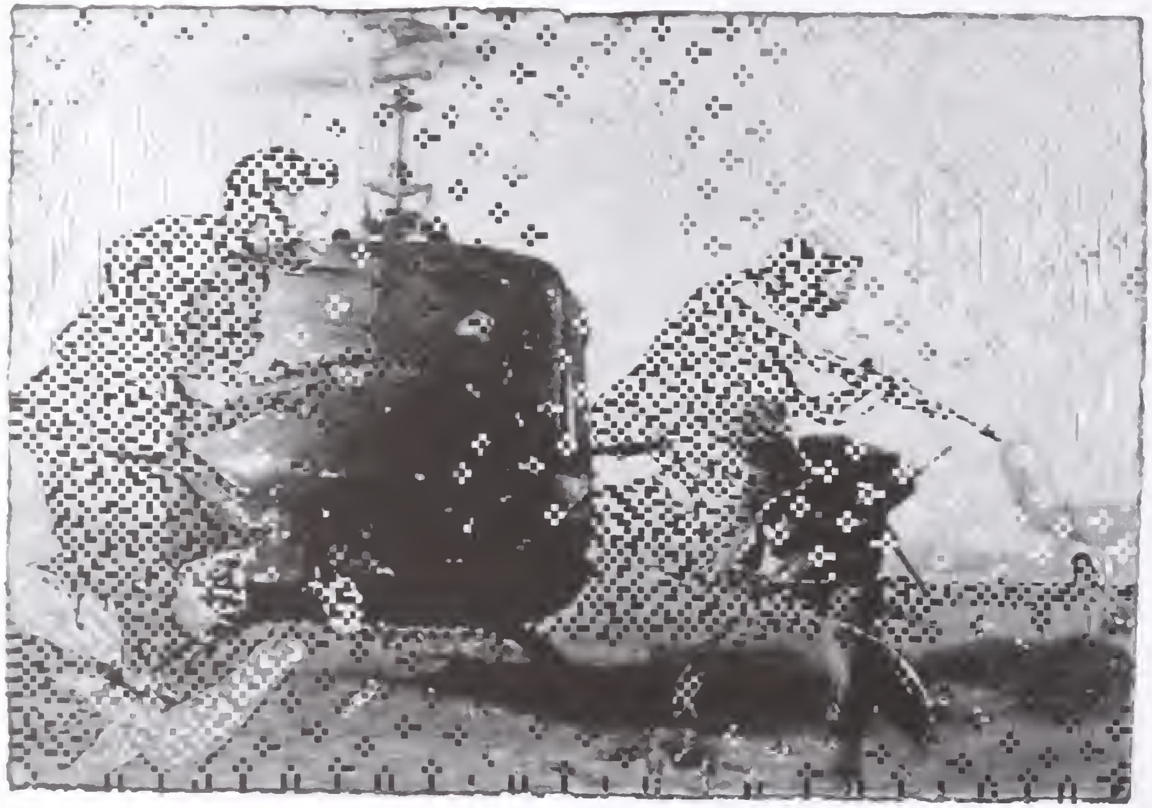
Lê, Kanwar, and Haddock remotivate and render complex popular, familiar imagery in order to make traumas more personal, more local, and more memorable. Yet their works also frustrate viewers, because the traumas that they represent are inherently unknowable and unrepresentable. Although they render its invisibility more visible, a traumatic void still remains.

A final framework through which to understand these works is Theodor Adorno's concept of reeducation, which he developed in the wake of the massive international trauma of World War II. Adorno argued that the only way to prevent such terrific violence from occurring again was to change the way past traumas are understood. He believed in the processes of reflection and critique as a means to face the voids left by large-scale cultural and historical traumas such as war and genocide. "One must labor

DINH Q. LÊ
Persistence of Memory #14, 2000–01
Photograph courtesy PPOW Gallery, New York

against this lack of reflection, must dissuade people from striking outward without reflecting upon themselves," he writes in *Can One Live after Auschwitz?* "The only education that makes any sense at all is an education toward critical self-reflection."[7] Lê, Kanwar, and Haddock create spaces and images within which reflective dialogue can occur and criticism is welcome.

Later in this essay, Adorno outlines his concept of reified consciousness, "a consciousness [that is] blinded to all historical past, all insight into one's own conditionedness, and posits as absolute what exists contingently. If this cohesive mechanism were once ruptured, then, I think, something would indeed be gained."[8] The possibility for this type of rupture is imagined by Lê, Kanwar, and Haddock: By recasting journalistic images of trauma in different physical and temporal forms, the trauma is open to examination and explication. We are reeducated through remediation, and this reeducation helps negotiate the disconnect between past and present, self and other, trauma and everyday life.



NOTES

1 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 255.

2 See Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

3 Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Geneology* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 300.

4 Ibid.

5 See Moira Roth, "Obdurate History: Dinh Q. Lê, The Vietnam War, Photography, and Memory," *Art Journal* 60 (Summer 2001).

6 Sontag, 122.

7 Theodor Adorno, *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiederman, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 21.

8 Ibid., 28.

Digital Détournements

Spectacle in a Networked Culture

BENJAMIN GODSILL

Oh my goodness gracious, what you can buy off the Internet in terms of overhead photography. A trained ape can know an awful lot of what is going on in this world, just by punching on his mouse.

—Donald Rumsfeld, June 9, 2001

In their recent book, *Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (2005), the activist collective Retort points to a contradiction in our current social and political moment. "Control over the image is now the key to social power," they write; It is primarily via images that ideologies are inscribed in subjects, yet it is at this very level that the state and the project of Empire are most vulnerable.[1] The desire of the current regime to maintain its hegemonic power— economic, social, and political—necessitates controlling the meaning of images, images that act ever increasingly as "the real" in lieu of the actualities they represent. This notion of images as "detached from every aspect of life"[2] evokes Guy Debord's notion of the spectacle as the organizing principle of our current social world. Debord argued that "all that was once directly lived has become mere representation," that discursive structures are derived not from real events in real time and space but instead from their representations.[3] It is in the discursive space of these representations—the spectacular—that the artists in *Image War* operate, seeking to remix, remediate, or use the tropes of spectacular media representations of violent conflict in order to disarticulate hegemonic ideologies and rearticulate alternative or oppositional discourses. In particular Coco Fusco, Claire Fontaine, and Joy Garnett are responding to a new, digitized form of the spectacular, one rooted in recent economic and technological shifts. In the above epigraph Rumsfeld acknowledged—in oblique passing—the potential inherent in digitized spectacle culture for challenging hegemonies, a potential evinced by the work of Fontaine, Fusco, and Garnett. The works in *Image War* operate at the level of the digital spectacle out of necessity: one must address power in the language of power, for it is in the language and image of digital spectacle that hegemony is formed, and where it is most vulnerable.

Mark Hansen writes that because "the digital image is an accumulation of . . . discontinuous fragments, each of which can be addressed independently of the whole, there is no longer

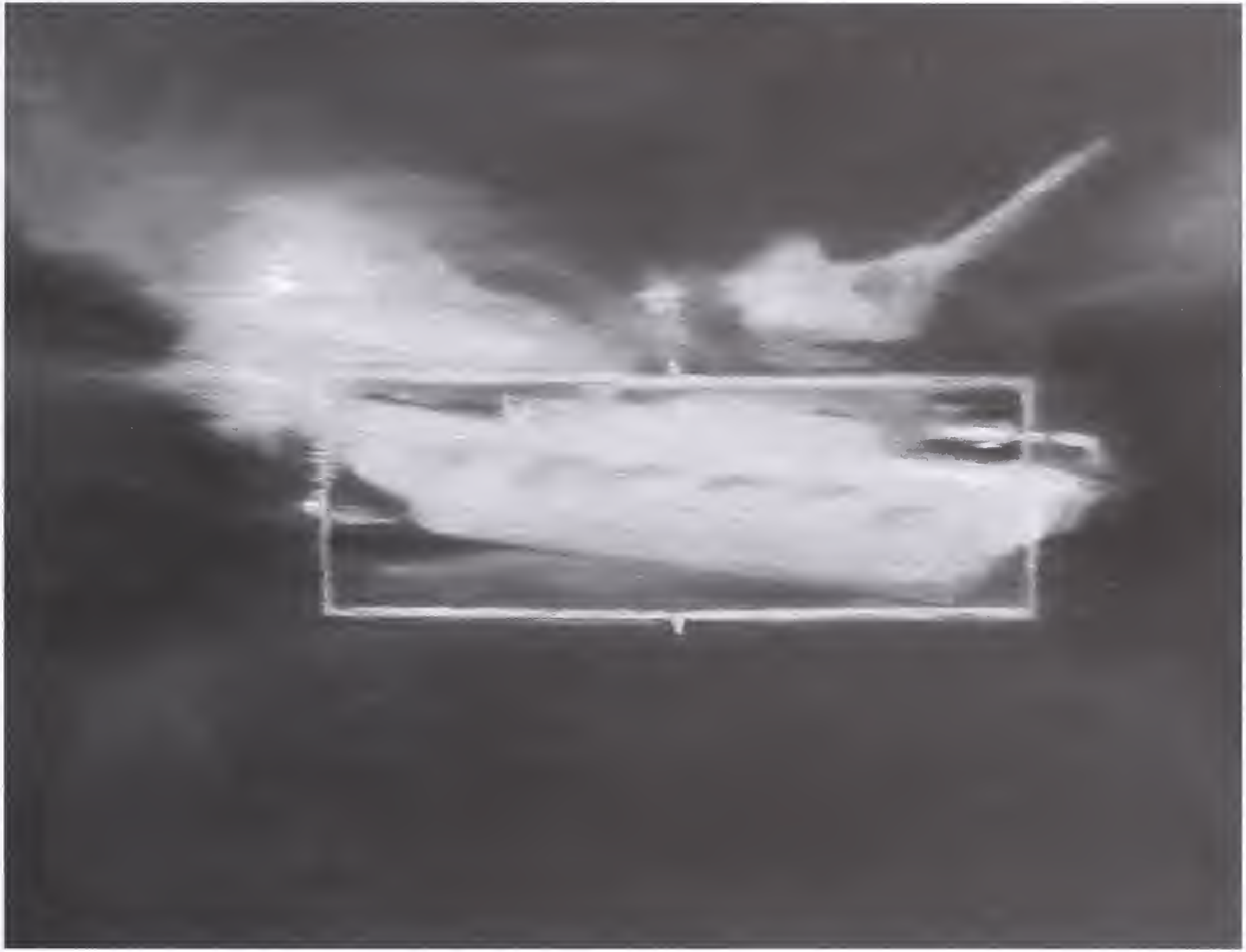
CLAIRE FONTAINE
Father & Son (Hooded Prisoner and Child), 2005

anything materially linking the content of the image with its frame."[4] It is this de-linking of images that denotes our present moment of spectacle, a moment that is inscribed by—and operates within—the digital. Thanks to digital imaging, representations of violent conflict are often cleansed of real violence to real bodies. Night vision, GPS technologies, laser-guided bombs, and satellite imagery replace images of the violent destruction of actual bodies. Amid the physical obliteration of real bodies, war is waged on the level of the virtual and visual. As Retort formulates, the disconnection of images from systems of meaning-making increases their powers of social control; images acquire the ability to inscribe ideologies, ways of seeing the world, and viewpoints onto subjects when the gulf between the actual and the representation widens. With this growth, the ideological formulations supporting the construction, editing, broadcast, and reception of images increase in agency, as these functions connect image and event.

Joy Garnett's painting *Kill Box* (2001) acts to deconstruct the hegemonic links between image and event. Garnett remediates one of the many techno-fetishist visual representations of the first Gulf War, hand-painting a tank in the digital target area—or kill box—that (presumably) a pilot has used to launch the missile seen blowing it apart. Garnett's low-res style and palette mimics the electronic green and ghostly white of the night vision technologies used by American forces in that conflict, and *Kill Box* mirrors media representations of the Gulf War conflict that relied on digital technologies for both its execution and for the live feed of its images on global news. Those media representations were rendered from the point of view of machines that were designed and used to harm bodies, their night vision and infrared points of view incapable of representing real physical bodies being destroyed yet masterful at creating cleansed, video-game-like war images to be beamed into living rooms.

Death—in both Garnett's painting and the war's media representations—was represented as occurring at the level of the virtual, in the clean, digital box rendered on our television screens, not on the ground at the level of the actual carnage. Removing the human body from war images, and substituting in its place images of technological marvel that bespeak the superiority of Empire, inscribes representations of political conflict in the digital spectacular. By recasting this technologized form of war and bodily destruction in the human hand with paint on canvas, Garnett uses the representational strategies of digital spectacle to reinsert the human in the destruction that spectacle hides. *Kill Box* operates within the spectacle, but in a counter-hegemonic manner, attempting to close the gap between the real pain and horror of death and its spectacular representation.

Like *Kill Box*, the other works in *Image War* respond not only to representations of war but also to the base material supports upon which the new digital superstructure of detached images is built and functions to serve. On the material level this work evinces what theorist David Harvey calls a new hegemonic formation of capitalism—neoliberalism—rooted in resurgent rounds of dispossession and the accumulation of capital through force and other primitive modes.[5] It would be undesirable (and impossible) to dissociate these new modes of capital accumulation from the digital networks—and digital spectacle—that both result from and facilitate the era of Empire. Empire depends on digital technology not only to inscribe ideologies on subjects in the realm of spectacle, but also materially; such technologies allow neoliberal global capitalism to function. While digital technologies offer possibilities for a freer flow of



JOY GARNETT
Kill Box, 2001

information, the distributed networks that foster neoliberalism's idealistic vision also permit capital's control—fiscal and military—over vast spatial arenas that exist everywhere and nowhere at once.[6]

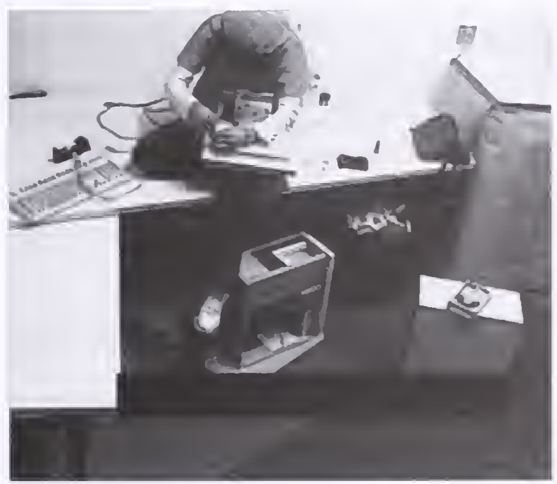
Coco Fusco's installation *Dolores from 10 to 10* (2002) documents (and, in some ways, reenacts and reactivates) a 2001 live performance and Internet broadcast by the artist and Ricardo Dominguez. The work comprises a group of small black-and-white video monitors similar to those used for surveillance. On the screens are various silent video images with constantly changing angles and backgrounds, apparently taken from different cameras (again similar to video surveillance). The images vary from the horrific to the banal: a woman in an anonymous room apparently being berated by a much larger man; the same room empty; a different view of the room with the woman alone, looking forlorn; an empty corridor. *Delores from 10 to 10* is based on the testimony of a Mexican worker in a *maquiladora* (a factory on the Mexican side of the U.S. border) who was detained and interrogated by factory bosses for twelve hours—without access to food, water, telephone, or a bathroom—on the suspicion that she was a union organizer. The woman attempted to press charges against her tormentors in Mexican courts but was unsuccessful due to a lack of physical evidence. In this work Fusco mimics the trope of video surveillance in order to image an act of political, human violence that previously had none, translating the undervalued testimony of an oppressed worker into something more than a speech act.

The work's permutations in different media—live performance, distributed broadcast, and, in *Image War*, video installation—reveal the unfixable nature of digital images in relation to that which they claim to represent. Fusco uses the digital not simply as a mode of distribution, but to break up the work materially across various platforms, similar to the way in which divergent images are digitally disassembled and

COCO FUSCO
Dolores from 10 to 10, 2002

reassembled in various geographical and psychic spaces over digital networks like the Internet. This digitally emboldened nomadism parallels the original violence perpetrated by factory managers against the worker; a border factory is in many senses a "nonplace," attached neither to the country in which it exists in a physical sense (Mexico) nor to the country serviced by its exploited labor (the United States). Fusco represents and reanimates the spheres of the digital spectacle and global labor relations with the story of a worker that was lost—in many ways because its original re-presentation was not spectacular enough.

Claire Fontaine's sculpture *Father & Son (Hooded Prisoner and Child)* (2005) also strives to re-articulate a more progressive ideology within the discursive space of the digital spectacular. In the artist's words—which serve as a framework for *Image War* in general—she is attempting "to open the question of the collective reappropriation of the means of production of the present,"[7] a present whose means and modes are overwhelmingly digital. In this work Fontaine took as her starting point a heavily reproduced news photograph of a hooded adult sitting on the ground clinging to a small child. Fontaine outlined the figures in glowing white neon, making them unrecognizable and abstract for a split second before becoming identifiable as one of the many horrific images of a captured "enemy combatant" in the recent Iraq war. The use of neon here acknowledges the necessity to deal with spectacle culture on its own material terms. Yet at the same time Fontaine seems to challenge that need, applying black paint over the neon and making no attempt to conceal the various electronic apparatuses that power the sculpture. In its rapid movement to readability from a materiality that is equal parts glitter and abstraction, *Father & Son (Hooded Prisoner and Child)* operates at the same hyperrealized speed of digital spectacle. An overload of multimedia images



in contemporary image culture allows hegemonic regimes to inscribe ideological meta-narratives. Fontaine taps the same cognitive abilities of the subject targeted by Empire to meet different ends. In the work's move toward abjection—the horror of seeing the guardian, hooded and detained, dehumanized by the removal of his face, and clinging to the child—the work disrupts the flow of spectacular media, disarticulating its hegemonic ideologies from its representational strategies.

The work in *Image War* shares this project, attempting to articulate a more progressive ideology in the discursive space of image culture. These works operate within the spectacle, acknowledging its contemporary importance in shaping subjects while also recognizing and acting upon its potential weak points. They operate indirectly in order to bridge the gaps and fissures between events and their representations that Empire exploits so well.

NOTES

Epigraph. Department of Defense News Transcript, June 9, 2001 (http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2001/t06112001_t0609end.html).

1 Retort, *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (New York, Verso, 2005), 27–28.

2 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 12.

3 Ibid.

4 Mark B. N. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 9.

5 David Harvey (lecture, Whitney Museum of Art Independent Study Program, New York, November 8, 2006).

6 For a more thorough account of how such networks can enact control, see Alexander Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

7 Claire Fontaine (artist statement, Reena Spaulings Gallery, New York, Fall 2005).

Life Remixed

SUSANNE Ø. SÆTHER

A key premise of *Image War* is that the early 1990s was a crucial moment in the emergence of a specific media culture, one in which the relationship between data or information on the one hand and living human bodies on the other was progressively redefined. As the CNN coverage of the first Gulf War illustrates, human bodies seemed, quite literally, to disappear from the picture.[1] What appeared in their place were advanced vision and information technologies, which enabled viewers to see through the dark of night yet were restricted to geometric forms and light patterns, and which allowed for the following of American military measures—but not their attendant casualties—in real time. Advanced by digitized technologies for data processing and distribution, information today appears immaterial, detached from a particular material base and free to traverse time and space. This increased possibility for temporal immediacy in disseminating information about wars and conflicts on distant foreign ground manifests itself in the so-called CNN effect. Referring to a feedback loop between global, real time media and U.S. foreign policy-making, in which foreign policy conduct is influenced by the information provided by news media, the CNN effect appeared as an important factor in international relations after the first Gulf War.[2] Consequently, the increasingly effective processing and distribution of disembodied information (i.e., information understood as abstract patterns rather than as embodied presence) by means of digitized media technologies had a decisive impact on the political managing of living bodies, or, in other words, human life.

Yet this paradoxical information culture of the "flesh-eating '90s," as Arthur Kroker identifies it,[3] has found a counterpoint in artistic practice in what French curator Nicolas Bourriaud has characterized as a method of "postproduction."[4] A technical term for studio-based practices in audiovisual production, postproduction refers to processes applied to recorded, and thus preexisting, material; examples include editing, montage, subtitling, voice-overs, and special effects.[5] Manipulating material that already circulates in a cultural market—material that is not primary—postproduction art contributes to the obliteration of established distinctions between "production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work."[6] In the

JOHAN GRIMONPREZ
Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y, 1997
Photograph by Johan Grimonprez and Rony Vissers

RSG
Black Hawk Down (RSG-BLACK-11), 2005

postproduction process, the functions of existing materials or forms are redefined, reprogrammed as material tools to investigate contemporary social, cultural, political, or economic processes—processes that often appear immaterial, abstract, and invisible. One artistic response seeks, in Bourriaud's words, to "*rematerialize* these functions and processes, to give shape to what is disappearing before our eyes," and in this manner to "shatter the logic of the spectacle."[7]

In this essay I propose that the postproduction methods of the 1990s as outlined by Bourriaud should be understood in relation to two interrelated, contemporaneous conceptual shifts: first, a perceived separation between information and materiality, in which the former is seen as abstracted from and dominant over the latter; second, an understanding of biological life as fundamentally related to information, supported by the concept of "code" as a common denominator of DNA and data, genetics, and informatics.[8] From this analogy between biological life and information, it follows that the "immaterialization" of information will eventually affect the conception of human life, which is increasingly understood as disembodied and thus beyond the conditions of vulnerability and mortality.[9] N. Katherine Hayles sees this "posthuman," disembodied subject as jeopardizing essential characteristics of the humanist, liberal, free self, especially its capacity for agency and choice. A crucial concern then becomes how these traditional, humanist forms of engagement, through a contestation of the dichotomy between materiality and information, can be articulated in a posthuman condition.[10]

A different consideration of the possibility for (individual) agency and control is found in the increasingly theorized notion of biopolitics. Developed in a trajectory that began with Michel Foucault's

JOHAN GRIMONPREZ
Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y, 1997
Photograph by Johan Grimonprez and Rony Vissers

History of Sexuality (1978) and the seminar series he held in Paris in 1975–76, biopolitics refers to the convergence of life and politics, mediated through institutions and techniques targeted at producing and managing human life. Implemented in the late nineteenth century, this "body politics" also represents a shift from the centralized power of sovereignty to the more decentralized power of what Foucault identifies as governmentality.[11] If Foucault's notion of biopolitics primarily concentrates on the power to govern the longevity and health of a population, this decentralized power of governmentality is suspended in exceptional circumstances, primarily political conflict and war, and sovereignty reinstalled. Subsequent formulations of biopolitics have focused on this state of exception. For Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, sovereignty is in fact not the exception from the decentralized power of biopolitics, but rather its very condition: It is the threat to life itself—what Agamben calls "bare life"—that legitimizes the state of exception in which sovereignty can reappear.[12] "Bare life" and sovereignty are thus connected in a state of exception.

From the complex of disembodied information, human life, and politics in a "state of exception," we can extract two urgent concerns: a potential loss of agency and choice for the human subject, engendered by the separation of information and material bodies (as formulated by Hayles), and the reinstalling of state sovereignty through a particular notion of "life itself" (as formulated by Agamben). If all of the works in *Image War* employ a method of postproduction in their attempt to "shatter the logic of the spectacle," those of Johan Grimonprez, RSG, and Tamiko Thiel and Zara Houshmand particularly address the concerns outlined here and envision different possibilities for resistance.

Shared by the three works is the formal strategy of appropriating and reordering elements of mediated information about political violence. In the video work *Black Hawk Down (RSG-BLACK-1)* (2005), the artist collective RSG digitally edited out every image featuring white actors in Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* (2001), which depicts American military operations in Somalia in 1993.[13] While *Black Hawk Down (RSG-BLACK-1)* remixes elements from a single source, the two other works compile a variety of archival material dealing with one particular manifestation of political conflict. Johan Grimonprez's video *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* (1997) is a chronology of televised airplane hijackings interspersed with self-produced recordings, clips from feature films, television commercials, and stock footage. Tamiko Thiel and Zara Houshmand's interactive virtual reality installation *Beyond Manzanar* (2000) explores the political context of internment camps.[14] Navigating the installation, the viewer encounters media imagery, official documents, cultural relics, private memorabilia, and photographs juxtaposed and recast.

This basic strategy of these works can be understood as a *remixing* of material already present in our mediated surroundings, and therefore as one of several postproduction "methods." The cultural form

RSG

Black Hawk Down (RSG-BLACK-1), 2005

of remixing is, as Lev Manovich has argued, a new form of information processing and distribution, emerging from increasingly digitized media technologies. (Such technologies include, for example, software that simplifies the technical operation of remixing, and networked information structures that greatly increase the ease of locating and reusing material from a range of different periods, artists, and designers.)[15] The connection of the term "remix" to the realm of popular music is not coincidental; for postproduction art the figure of the DJ and the programmer are icons, as Bourriaud points out, both "have the task of selecting cultural objects and inserting them into new context."[16] Such a reordering of elements from one or several media sources allows for the investigation of established patterns of knowledge production and the creation of new possibilities for connecting fragments of existing information.

Through the process of reduction, specifically by editing out and scaling down from the cinematic screen to the video monitor, *Black Hawk Down (RSG-BLACK-1)* questions agency and power in the "Battle of Mogadishu," as it is often labeled, as well as its highly polished cinematic representation. Based on a Hollywood feature film that has itself been criticized for rewriting the conflict, RSG addresses how the popular media's framing and narrative organization construct our understanding of distant conflicts in favor of an ethnocentric perspective. By contrast, *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* exaggerates information strategies already formatted by various media, in particular the popular media's traditionally coherent and rationalized versions of historical narrative. Radically juxtaposing spectacular footage from a variety of sources, the work mimics the rhythm and leaps of television channel-changing. At the same time, the video maintains an affinity to Hollywood cinema in its aestheticized and seductive quality, which in turn is enhanced by composer David Shea's easy-listening soundtrack. A related gesture of bringing together a variety of archival material is at work in *Beyond Manzanar*. Through an implied juxtaposition of the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II with the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979–80 and the ensuing calls for internment of Iranian-Americans, official and subjective histories collide across time and space. Here, the archival artifacts and documents work as spaces for remembrance and contemplation from within the confinement of the camp, rendering Manzanar a site for inward rather than outward movement, an in-between state of life in suspension.

Hence, remixing is not only a formal strategy; in these works, the act of navigating, locating, and connecting bits and pieces of information is itself the *subject* of artistic practice.[17] Increasingly networked information structures, enabled by digital media technologies, are here figured as models for alternative forms of knowledge production and for the invention of new paths through what can otherwise appear as abundant or biased information. It follows from the analogy between information and human life previously proposed that the data reconfigured in these works also implies a consideration of agency and the political governing of human life.

In virtually re-creating a so-called "war relocation center" as an immersive environment for the viewer to navigate at his or her own pace, *Beyond Manzanar* addresses the tension between the agency of freely moving around and the structures that confine this very freedom. As the user discovers, there is no way out of the camp (except, perhaps, through "inward" movement, into the memories that constitute personal identity). In requiring kinesthetic activity on the part of the user, the work reinscribes the human body in the virtual reality of the camp and

TAMIKO THIEL & ZARA HOUSHMAND
Beyond Manzanar, 2000

RSG
Black Hawk Dawn (RSG-BLACK-I), 2005

evokes a sense of agency, yet choices can only be made within clearly confined boundaries. This potentially frustrating limitation is further augmented by the fact that the work is ultimately linear; users can only progress from space to space rather than freely wander around in a nonlinear fashion. This restricted agency evokes Agamben's notion of a "zone of indistinction." According to his formulation of biopolitics, the sovereign is always both inside and outside the law: it has declared the law, and therefore also has the power to declare a state of exception from the law, "a zone of indistinction between right and violence, law and life, that results in the very figure sovereign power is supposed to protect"[18] — that is, "bare life." Agamben's paradigmatic "zones of indistinction" are the refugee, internment, and extermination camps of the twentieth century, "technologies" of life in which biopolitics easily can turn into "thanathopolitics."[19] In *Beyond Manzanar*, the devaluation of basic human rights in this zone becomes evident.[20]

While *Beyond Manzanar* construes an alternative space from the perspective of victims, *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* tells its story from the perspective of active agents challenging the state monopoly on violence. The work thus questions the sovereign power, localized in the nation-state, to declare a state of exception, in which the power to manage and terminate human life becomes indistinct. The threat of violence to the human body is here envisaged as a way to claim agency in a context of international politics dominated by acknowledged nation-states.[21] Terrorist activity—not legitimized by a sovereign power—is symptomatic of a networked society in which not only information but violent acts are organized in distributed and decentralized patterns.[22] As the work implies, the possibility for (violent) agency within this decentralized and networked structure is inherently determined by media exposure: Framing devices such as editing, superimpositions, juxtaposition, and narrativizing reveal the media to be the true active agents. Like *Beyond Manzanar, Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* investigates the possibilities for individual agency within the confinement of

RSG
Black Hawk Down (RSG-BLACK-1), 2002

sovereign power and explores the dichotomy between living human bodies and mediated information—but here resistance takes the form of explosive and spectacular violence.

In the elliptical remix *Black Hawk Down (RSG-BLACK-1)*, all that remains of Scott's film are Somali children running in empty streets, shady warlords, and heavily armed, dark silhouettes against a burning sky. The almost hyperrealist aesthetics of the Hollywood production render the graphic war imagery simulacral and ghostly. Exhibited on a television monitor, the work recalls the CNN effect that was thought to have crucially impacted the military operation, as the media distributed extremely violent images from the fights. In particular, grisly images of a dying, high-ranking American soldier dragged through the backstreets of Mogadishu by local militia affected policy about how to address what was becoming an increasingly out-of-control situation. More specifically, these images seemed to reactivate the so-called Vietnam syndrome, in which many understood media coverage to have undermined political and public support for military operations and affected troop morale; eventually such coverage contributed to the Clinton administration's decision to withdraw American troops from Somalia.[23] In this case, the real time flow of information became a constituent of public opinion, opposing the sovereign power of the U.S. military operation and representing a possibility for political agency. The work seems to imply, however, that resistance mounts more easily when sovereign power fails. *Black Hawk Down (RSG-BLACK-1)* thus addresses the declaration of a "state of exception" in what was initially a peacekeeping operation, one that was instigated to save lives but that in the end demonstrated how easily human life becomes devalued—perhaps even more so if it is the life of an "other" ethnicity.

Taken together, the works by RSG, Thiel and Houshmand, and Grimonprez suggest that one effective way to investigate and critique the current situation, in which human life and information are considered analogous, is to work from *within* media

TAMIKO THIEL & ZARA HOUSHMAND
Beyond Manzanar, 2000


بنهار مکر از بنده کد پنهان نشود
باغی بنویسی زندان

images—to, in Bourriaud's words, "utilize" them—rather than attempting to move beyond representation. Instead, these works envision a "culture of activity" in which appropriated images are reprogrammed as tools for use in challenging established hierarchies of knowledge and power.[24] Accordingly, the strategy of remixing employed in these works proposes an intervention not only in the realm of information processing and media representation, but also in the hierarchical processing and managing of human life in the "state of exception" that is war.

NOTES

1 John Taylor, *Body Horror* (New York. New York University Press, 1998).

2 Steven Livingston, "Clarifying the CNN Effect: An Examination of Military Effects According to Type of Military Intervention" (http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/presspol/Research_Publications/Papers/Research_Papers/R18.pdf, 1997), 1. Livingston sees the "global real-time quality to contemporary media" (p. 1) as the feature that distinguishes the so-called CNN effect from earlier media effects on foreign policy. He distinguishes between three forms of CNN effects: as a policy agenda–setting agent; as an impediment to the achievement of desired foreign policy goals; and as an accelerant to policy decision-making. The CNN effect is understood to have played a central part in U.S. military operations in Somalia, Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Haiti.

3 Qtd. in N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Become Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 5.

4 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction. Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002).

5 Ibid., 13.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 32.

8 This interrelation between immaterial information and human life has its origins in the intersection of discourses on molecular biology and cybernetic theory in the post-WWII period (Hayles 1999; Eugene Thacker, *Biomedia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 52).

9 Hayles, 5.

10 Ibid.

11 Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in *Power. The Essential Works of Michel Foucault*, ed. J. Faubion (New York: New Press, 2000).

12 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

13 In this reedit, the work is reduced from the original feature film's duration of 144 minutes to 22 minutes.

14 Manzanar is the name of the first camp, built in California, for the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II.

15 Lev Manovich, "Remix and Remixability" (http://rhizome.org/thread.rhiz?thread=19303&page=1, 2005).

16 Bourriaud, 13.

17 Ibid., 18.

18 Eugene Thacker, "Nomos, nosos and bios in the body politic," in *Culture Machine 7*, 2005 (http://culturemachine.tees.ac.uk/frm_f1.htm).

19 Agamben, 122,123.

20 As Judith Butler has argued also the current "war on terror" is promoted to install a state of exception, a "war without end" that allows for extralegal detention in Guantánamo Bay of persons deemed "dangerous." Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London; New York: Verso, 2004), 79.

21 Accordingly, "nonlegitimate" violent acts can here be understood as an attempt to contest the loss of agency and control that according to N. Katherine Hayles follows from the analogy between immaterialized information and living human bodies (so defining for the "posthuman condition").

22 Terrorism as a 'dominant form' of violence today can be seen to mirror the decentralized structures of networked, technological societies. Yet the decentralized, cell-based structures of terrorism (from the Algerian battle for independence to the hijackings in the 1970s) existed before technological networks. What seems to be 'new' in this situation is the globally networked structure of the current Islamic fundamentalist terrorism and its targets, as opposed to the rather localized agendas of groups such as ETA, IRA, RAF, or Hamas/Hezbollah.

23 Livingston, 2–5.

24 Bourriaud, 92.

The Presence of Absence

Art and Media Critique

STAMATINA GREGORY

Recent critical debates on the relative merits and problems of documentary arguably continue to shape contemporary representations of violent conflict. The question of whether representations of political violence are aestheticized, necessary, or counterproductive takes on a new resonance in a contemporary moment of extreme, corporatized control of media images and their widespread proliferation and dissemination through digital technologies. Martha Rosler has written explicitly on the "dichotomies of accuracy and aesthetics" that structure documentary photography, suggesting that the power dynamics inherent in its production and reception inevitably cause it to fall prey to moralizing forces and thus, ineffectuality.[1] About specifically violent imagery, Roland Barthes wrote that the grisly photograph is the one "about which there is nothing to say," implying that explicitly traumatic images suspend language and block meaning,[2] while Susan Sontag conversely argued that the viewing of such imagery, while problematic, is ultimately necessary in order to understand the acts of which human beings are capable. In our postmodern era, the notion that photographs or other lens-based imagery can claim any kind of truth, or be ethically deployed without representing a dominant position among an infinite range of subjectivities, is often dismissed outright.

Yet the contemporary proliferation of critical art and film works employing documentary modes suggests a new urgency behind the investigation of global issues, particularly those related to conflict. Many artists are currently rethinking both the role of documentary as a viable critique of mass media and the very structure of documentary modes. John Taylor, in his work on contemporary representations of violence and war in the American and European press, writes that documentary's current problems do not stem from historical calls for it to represent some absolute "truth," but rather from how it is deployed within a consolidated, corporatized media structure that often indiscriminately exercises power.[3] The strategic representational choices in the work of Rainer Ganahl, Willie Doherty, and An-My Lê, then, are not a rejoinder to some inherent ineffectuality of documentary form or graphic representation but an acknowledgment that sociopolitical messages are always contextual. Through various temporal and representational strategies, these artists respond to

AN-MY LÊ
29 Palms: Mechanized Assault, 2003–04

the means by which text and image about political violence are distributed and framed.

In particular, by foregrounding absence (of graphic, overtly traumatic imagery), Ganahl, Doherty, and Lê question dominant assumptions about the specific conflicts to which their work refers. Absence not only promotes dialogue about the work and encourages its protracted contemplation; the breaks, blank spaces, and flat expanses themselves testify to an indeterminacy of iconographic or narrative meaning, suggest a kind of counterknowledge, and tacitly address the "accuracy and aesthetics" of the document. For Pierre Macherey, the inherent gaps, absences, and silences in a text render it incomplete, and it is in this lack of a coherent whole that the work's significance lies.[4] Within absence resides a critical potential for works to be examined in their relationship to ideology; a "structured absence" in these works reveals the positions the viewer brings to the representation of conflict and provides a space for their rethinking. In these works by Ganahl, Doherty, and Lê, bodies are absent, darkened, or distant, and visual evidence is never verifiable. Conflicts are not graphically or "truthfully" depicted here; they are deferred, remembered, or anticipated.

In his *Afghan Dialogs* series (2001–03), Rainer Ganahl addresses visual fragmentation by isolating the "tags" continually broadcast on news channels such as CNN. Ganahl stitched multiple tags (including familiar buzz phrases from the months following September 11, 2001, such as "Next Target?" and "Homeland Security") onto broad expanses of embroidered white silk. Through the assistance of New York's Afghan community, Ganahl's textiles were shipped overseas to several members' contacts in Afghanistan—the primary locus of military aggression at the time of their making—with a request that recipients stitch their own personal or political comments below the tags. In spite of various miscommunications and partial confiscation by customs agents, multiple textiles were returned to the artist with anonymous yet pointed commentary (such as, "Attacking Muslim countries, America should at least respect American opposition").

In discussing his work, Ganahl addresses the defense mechanisms one develops for dealing with an endless flow of political information, in which data is constantly disseminated with a time lapse of mere seconds.[5] Multimedia streams simultaneously convey information on disaster, war, and military aggression, most often on situations that seem remote to the developed world; due to both the means by which this information is framed (in a way that effaces the nature of its production) and our conditioned response to its unceasing flow, it is processed in stride. By laying out such banal, politically loaded, and often belligerent tags for scrutiny, and by isolating them from the visual noise of their on-screen surroundings, Ganahl interrupts that flow. This interruption occurs on several levels: in the absence of imagery that usually surrounds such tags, replaced by the emptiness of the white support; and also on a temporal level, as the time involved in communicating with Afghanis and awaiting a painstakingly stitched response radically contrasts the instantaneity of electronic communication. In Macherey's discussions of the inherent incompleteness of all texts, he contends that meaning can be created or recovered in any text's breaks, interruptions, or accidents. Here, the "interruption" of the visual noise surrounding the tags, and its replacement with empty space, provides a forum for response from the target of American aggression, the "other" to whom the tag's information was never directed. The Afghan citizens' one-time presence in the final stages of the works' creation is only documented by their textual responses; just as our media culture prevents us from seeing them, so they remain undepicted here.

AN-MY LÊ
29 Palms: Infantry Platoon (Retreat), 2003–04

The empty space of the work, surrounding a hand-stitched fragment of text and imagery from the corporate media in conjunction with the words of an anonymous person (or persons), becomes a resonant field of multiple meanings. The work no longer provides the swift, cognitive assimilation characteristic of its referent. Although they possess a definitive aesthetic, Ganahl's *Afghan Dialogs* are always exhibited with their respective translations, thus circumventing the Western inclination to see Arabic or Persian script as decorative embellishment. A proliferation of meaning is formally reinforced by the rich texture of the textile's entire surface (which extends over the white space, with white-on-white embroidery), both referring to artwork culturally specific to the Middle East and bearing the handiwork, if not the image, of bodies in an embattled zone.

The imagery in Willie Doherty's dual-channel video installation *Tell Me What You Want* (1996) is also made more resonant by absence. Two backlit, silhouetted heads, one on each monitor, recount their personal brushes with death, violence, and intimidation. While their uneven, circuitous recollections merge and diverge unpredictably, they seem to touch upon the same brutal incident related to IRA activities and their repercussions in Northern Ireland. Their brief statements are interspersed with longer shots of a grassy field and a rainy street illuminated by red light. Seamlessly looped, the images and dialogue reappear with no apparent beginning or end.

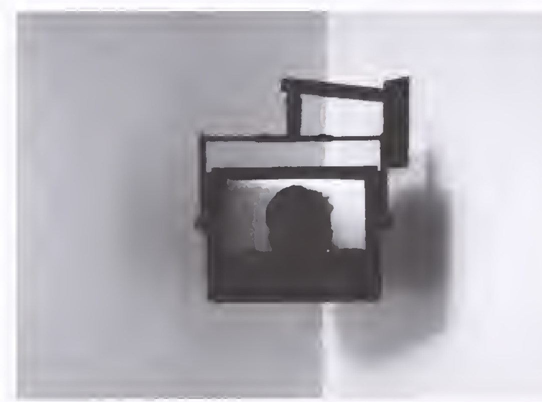
Doherty's work loosely corresponds to the broadcast media trope of the silhouetted talking head, in which the identity of a witness is ostensibly protected while he or she reveals personal and important information. The video itself is emptied of any evidentiary qualities, however; no cogent narrative can be constructed from the "testimony" provided by

WILLIE DOHERTY
Tell Me What You Want, 1996
Video installation with two monitors and sound
Photograph courtesy Matt's Gallery, London, and Alexander and Bonin, New York

these anonymous witnesses. In addition, while a television exposé program might typically cut from the anonymous witness to the "scene of the crime," such scenes are here replaced by a landscape and streetscape devoid of people, activity, or forensic evidence. As opposed to the conventional rapid pan, the sheer length of these shots demands attention to their tiniest details of sound and movement, as the viewer searches for any hint of impending action.

Absence is strategically deployed in this work on several levels. *Tell Me What You Want* empties a common news trope of action and coherence and temporally stretches it to a nearly uncomfortable level. Unlike the network media's onslaught of continuous, totalizing information, Doherty gives us radically slowed, subtle fragments. His work mimics documentary codes, but lacks "news value" in its poetic undermining of the boundaries between truth and fiction, perception and memory. The spoken recollections that constitute "testimony" in the work are deliberately ambiguous and compel the viewer to attempt to construct a cohesive whole from the fragments. As Macherey has stated, ideology often manifests itself in the breaks and absences of a text. Accordingly, the efforts of viewers of *Tell Me What You Want* to reconstruct its narrative and fill in its gaps rely on their contextual and historical knowledge of the conflict in Northern Ireland, a conflict based on the clash of several opposing ideologies. Refusing any particular position, the work itself resists the polarizing tendencies of the media in reporting on this and other conflicts, and suggests that any space for critical reflection can become a space for change.

The work's absences and "eventlessness" can be read as a metaphorical evocation of the urban landscape of Northern Ireland in the 1990s. "Normalisation" policies instituted in the 1980s were responsible for gentrification and an influx of capital



RAINER GANAHL
Afghan Dialogs with Anonymous Live Live Live Evil
2002–03

Translation: How cheap is the blood of human beings and ugly is this game of blood and tears. Dear friends, this is a universally admitted fact that this war is for oil, which is much more expensive than human blood.

into the region, processes which rendered the physical markers of recent history virtually invisible. At the time *Tell Me What You Want* was made, much of Northern Ireland had undergone a cosmetic change. An exterior, untroubled veneer was bolstered by a cease-fire and the removal of several checkpoints and other public markers of conflict, yet underlying political power structures remained firmly in place. The video's empty yet evocative landscape and streetscape reflect the absence of exterior evidence of postcolonial wounds, yet the accompanying testimonies bespeak a lingering interior dissonance.[6]

Also engaged in the reexamination of a particular site of conflict is An-My Lê, whose photographic series *29 Palms* pictures the bodies of soldiers ostensibly engaged in precombat activity. Begun in 2003, the project records a large swath of California's Mojave Desert, which is used as a combat-training zone for Marines bound for Iraq and Afghanistan. Taken with a large-format camera, which allows for the capture of exceptional detail, Lê's photographs show Marines in various stages of training: processing in tanks, undergoing briefing, or retreating in formation into the vast, dusty desert.

While at first glance these images may appear to be photojournalistic shots of American military occupation in Iraq or Afghanistan, the Mojave bears little resemblance to Baghdad or rocky Afghan terrain. In addition, while none of the depicted drills were staged for Lê's camera, her shots are too deliberately composed to pass for documentary.[7] Lê chose this site for her project after being denied entry to Iraq as an "embed," yet her aesthetic and conceptual decisions speak volumes about the documentation of conflict itself.

In the first Gulf War, information was notoriously and overtly controlled. Images of dead Americans and dead Iraqis were almost impossible to find in the American media (although they were plentiful in the Arab and European press). Instead, for most Americans, the images that linger are the endlessly replayed, video-game-like documentations of precision bombing attacks (which turned out not to be so precise after all).[8] In the most recent war in the Gulf, the Bush administration instituted the practice of embedding—placing photographers and reporters with ground troops for an eye-level vision of conflict. Critics of the practice claimed it would further bias war reportage. The historically dominant media paradigm of the extreme regulation of news over the substratum of electronically disseminated information has remained, with some exception, largely intact, however.

In most of the photographs in *29 Palms*, Lê depicts only the quiet, banal, and uneventful moments of precombat training, which bear little resemblance to remote, dehumanized precision bombing attacks, "evidence" of enemy capture, or the endless stream of buzzwords and analysis that passes for contemporary war reportage. Her embrace of analogue photography, the exceptional detail it can provide, and the time it takes to shoot and process, exists in radical contrast to the instantaneous production and dissemination of digital images in contemporary war reportage; the "interruptions" in her images exist temporally as well as formally. The figures she depicts are usually distant, blending into the black-and-white background of the prints; their backs are turned to the viewer (as in *Infantry Platoon (Retreat)*, 2003–04), or they remain obscured inside armored vehicles (*Mechanized Assault*, 2003–04). While the distancing of soldiers recalls the phenomenon of the disappeared body in news imagery and reports during the first Gulf War, Lê's work also extends back through photographic history to a critique of the constructed nature of the depiction of warfare. Her almost placid scenes bear a formal resemblance to those of Civil War photographer


LIVE
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کرم فرما، فضل، احسان کر دے
الٰہی! مشکلیں آسان کر دے
زمانہ جان کے درپے ہوا ہے
بچاؤ کا مرے سامان کر دے

Mathew Brady, whose images combined staged reportage of postbattle landscapes with a pictorial aesthetic. If the landscape in these two photographs, absent of action and affect, provides no more critical information on actual places and conditions of military action in the Middle East than most mass-media images, it certainly provides no less.

The strategic deployment of an aesthetic of absence in the work of Lê, Ganahl, and Doherty shifts focus from an active, overt, or graphic referent to dialogue—with themselves, with the "other," with photojournalistic history, and with contemporary media tropes. In a culture characterized by both the onslaught of political information and its corporatized control, this critical use of "structured absence" productively engages with the dissonance inherent in all representations of conflict and makes this dissonance available for critique. A space for reflection exists within these collisions of ideology and subjectivity, as does a space for resistance.

NOTES

1 Martha Rosler, "Post-Documentary, Post-Photography?," in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975–2001* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), 207.

2 Roland Barthes, *Image/Music/Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 90–91, quoted in John Taylor, *Body Horror: Photojournalism, Catastrophe, and War* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1998), 53.

3 Taylor, *Body Horror*, 44.

4 Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 32.

5 Rainer Ganahl, *Next Target? Petrified Politics* exh. cat. (Frankfurt, Germany: Revolver Verlag, 2004), 32.

6 Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

7 Karen Rosenberg, "An-My Lê: Murray Guy," *Artforum International* 43 (2004): 225.

8 Ibid.

RAINER GANAHL
Afghan Dialogs with Anonymous, Next Target?
2002

Translation: Attack on Afghanistan is just a lame excuse to occupy Asia

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

WILLIE DOHERTY (b. 1959)

Tell Me What You Want
1996, Video
Dimensions variable

Courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York

CLAIRE FONTAINE

Father & Son (Hooded Prisoner and Child)
2005, Neon, oil-based paint, fittings, and transformer
Dimensions variable

Courtesy Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York

COCO FUSCO (b. 1960)

Dolores from 10 to 10
2002, Video
Dimensions variable

Courtesy Projectile, New York, and the artist

RAINER GANAHL (b. 1961)

Afghan Dialogs with Anonymous, Next Target?
2002, Silk embroidery
24 x 30 1/2 in. (29 x 40 cm)

Courtesy Baumgartner Gallery, New York

RAINER GANAHL (b. 1961)

Afghan Dialogs with Anonymous, Live, Live, Live . . . Evil
2002/03, Silk embroidery
50 x 73 in. (125 x 182.5 cm)

Courtesy Baumgartner Gallery, New York

JOY GARNETT (b. 1960)

Kill Box
2001, Oil on canvas
38 x 48 in. (95 x 120 cm)

Collection of the artist

JOHAN GRIMONPREZ (b. 1962)

Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y
1997, Video
Dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist

JON HADDOCK (b. 1960)

General Loan Shoots a Suspect—Screenshot Series
2001, Digital chromogenic color print
22 1/2 x 30 in. (56.3 x 75 cm)

Private collection

JON HADDOCK (b. 1960)

Children Fleeing Napalm Attack—Screenshot Series
2001, Digital chromogenic color print
22 1/2 x 30 in. (56.3 x 75 cm)

Private collection

JON HADDOCK (b. 1960)

Quang Duc—Screenshot Series
2001, Digital chromogenic color print
22 1/2 x 30 in. (56.3 x 75 cm)

Private collection

JON HADDOCK (b. 1960)

Wang Weilen—Screenshot Series
2001, Digital chromogenic color print
22 1/2 x 30 in. (56.3 x 75 cm)

Private collection

AMAR KANWAR (b. 1964)

Ma Win Maw Oo
2005, Video
Dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist

AN-MY LÊ (b. 1960)

29 Palms: Infantry Platoon (Retreat)
2003–04, Gelatin silver print
26 x 37 1/2 in. (65 x 93.8 cm)

Courtesy Murray Guy Gallery, New York

AN-MY LÊ (b. 1960)

29 Palms: Mechanized Assault
2003–04, Gelatin silver print
26 x 37 1/2 in. (65 x 93.8 cm)

Courtesy Murray Guy Gallery, New York

DINH Q. LÊ (b. 1968)

Persistence of Memory #14
2000–01, Chromogenic color print and linen tape
45 x 63 in. (112.5 x 157.5 cm)

Collection of Larry Warsh

NEUROTRANSMITTER

Frequency Performance
Thursday June 8, 2006, 5:30 pm
The Art Gallery, The Graduate Center, City University of New York

RSG

Block Hawk Down (RSG-BLACK-1),
2005, Video
Dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist

TAMIKO THIEL & ZARA HOUSHMAND (b. 1957, b. 1953)

Beyond Manzanar
2000, Interactive virtual reality installation
Dimensions variable

Courtesy the artists

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